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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that writing can be an important vehicle for integrating all the learning that occurs in a foreign language. However, a number of factors have conspired to displace foreign language writing as a critical skill: the push for oral proficiency, departmental fragmentation, larger class sizes, and heavier faculty loads. Second language instruction should both teach the mechanics of writing in the target language and stress that writing builds critical thinking skills and ultimately produces more proficient writers in both native and second languages. This argument can be illustrated through an analysis of currently used oral language proficiency rating guidelines and their relationship to cognitive skill development. Second language prewriting strategies and writing assignments used in one college French curriculum are designed based on principles of native language writing instruction and include sentence-combining and critical text reading exercises, description and composition assignments, a mock press conference, a simulated travel diary, sequenced assignments on cultural topics, student paper exchanges, and dialectical journals. (MSE)

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Building Critical Thinking Skills Through Writing
in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Building Critical Thinking Skills Through Writing in the Foreign Language Classroom

In her excellent article, "Writing in the Native Language" featured in the 1986 Northeast Conference Report, Katherine Osterholm provides us with an illuminating summary of writing methodologies for first language classrooms. She calls our attention to the recent paradigm shift in writing instruction which is process-oriented. Proponents of the writing-as-process model argue that writing skills evolve and cognitive development accelerates through a recursive process of using language to discover and communicate meaning in our experience.

This model is further supported by research which strongly suggests that writing has a unique contribution to make as a mode of learning. Theorists like Janet Emig have outlined the numerous benefits of having our students learn through writing. Citing the work of developmental psychologists and sociolinguists, Emig argues that writing meets many of the basic requirements for successful learning.

Among the most important requirements for learning which promotes cognition is that it be connective and selective. Writing embodies both of these attributes because it necessarily involves the deliberate forging of links and relationships among seemingly disparate elements. It demands the use of higher cognitive functions like analysis and

synthesis in order to establish these systematic connections. Writing is, therefore, a skill which helps to build some of the critical thinking skills most educators list as a primary goal for liberal education.

For these reasons, many of our colleagues are making a convincing case for reexamining the legitimate place of writing across the curriculum. An awareness of the benefits of teaching writing as process has called attention to the importance of integrating writing more fully in all disciplines. What has the response been among our colleagues in FL teaching? What are the unique contributions that writing in a second language can offer?

In our own discipline, existing research indicates that writing can be an important vehicle for integrating all the learning that occurs in the foreign language. Educators like Claire Gaudiani advocate a greater role for writing in the FL classroom as a means of building skills which are not language-specific. Why then is writing often treated as the problematic skill in FL instruction?

Traditionally, a number of factors have conspired to displace writing in FL classes as a critical skill. Among them, the push for enhanced speaking proficiency and the fragmentation of educational institutions which has made the English department the unique province of expository writing. Moreover, in the last decade, retrenchment of FL faculty resulted in larger class sizes, heavier teaching loads and concomitant fears about overwhelming burdens of

evaluation if more writing was introduced into the FL curriculum. For all these reasons, many students in lower-level language courses in college and high school learn the writing system of a second language almost exclusively through structured workbook exercises or when they are forced to memorize formulae and verb paradigms for examinations.

In her definition of writing, Katherine Osterholm describes writing as that language activity which involves the production of written discourse complete in meaning, be it sentence, paragraph or essay. She does not include what teachers refer to as the mechanics of writing- vocabulary, drills, dissection of sentences and labeling of grammatical parts. In order to reap the cognitive benefits of language instruction students must be asked to integrate their discrete bits of learning into a meaningful whole through the medium of writing. Obviously in second language classes we must systematically engage in the mechanics of writing. We cannot assume, however, that completing structured exercises on a series of grammatical principles teaches our students how to write.

Writing, as defined by Osterholm, has traditionally not occupied a large place at the lower levels of our FL curricula. For this reason there is often a suspicion among our colleagues in other disciplines that in lower-level courses we are so concerned with skills-based instruction that strategies for developing higher cognitive skills are

often neglected, or worse, are unnecessary. Many of us open ourselves up to this criticism by not asking our students to develop strategies for written communication which are independent of the textbook or workbook. It is a fact, however, that our students may control only a small percentage of the second language grammar even after years of study. It is not surprising, therefore, that as they begin to write, our students are necessarily preoccupied with choices concerning correct grammatical forms and appropriate syntactical arrangements. Given this reality, how can we credibly make the claim that writing in the FL classroom builds critical thinking skills and ultimately produces more proficient writers in both languages?

In attempting to answer this question it is important to examine the trends in our profession which govern the methodologies we will adopt and the direction our curricula will take. There have been a number of conferences and a wealth of literature devoted to the concept of proficiency-based instruction. The provisional guidelines developed by ACTFL and ETS have generated much excitement as an organizing principle for establishing curricular goals and objectives in the proficiency-oriented classroom.

The guidelines are based on a rating scale which is used in conjunction with an oral interview test. The scale defines a hierarchy of emerging language skills across five levels from 0 to Superior. Each level on the scale has a tripartite organization which identifies the functions, accuracy and language context a user of the language can

handle. As speakers progress upward on the scale they move from simple to complex functions, from the self to the other, from the concrete to the abstract, and from unintelligibility to almost complete accuracy.

Many of our colleagues have postulated that FL curricular design should reflect the emergence of language skills of the ACTFL scale. They argue that if students actually perform at the lower end of the scale using only simple language functions on concrete topics, then it is unrealistic to assign them tasks which involve more sophisticated functions on abstract topics associated with the upper part of the scale.

Interestingly, a relational theorist, Moffett seems to acknowledge a growth in writing ability which follows a similar hierarchy of skills, in this case a hierarchy of discourse types. Moffett sees growth in written discourse as a move from the self to the other, that is from egocentricity to decenteredness. Moffett's theory of writing instruction involves the sequencing of writing assignments. He suggests a progression of writing assignments which begin with personal experience topics and move systematically toward impersonal, abstract topics.

The parallels between the ACTFL scale and Moffett's discourse types seem apparent. As we incorporate writing into our curricula, we may discover that respecting a hierarchy of language abilities will assure that our students make systematic progress in both cognitive

development and writing proficiency. There are a number of factors which promote cognition and encourage fluent writing. The pre-writing strategies we adopt and the writing assignments we craft should respect some governing principles. Despite the differences between English and FL writing classes, there are a number of principles gleaned from research in native language writing instruction which can well guide our thinking as we create appropriate writing assignments for our students:

- 1) Writing is a communication tool. Theorists like Moffett place importance on the relationship among speaker, message and audience. They define all discourse as "somebody-talking-to-somebody-about-something." Throughout the curriculum, writing remains a means of communicating a certain message to a particular audience.
- 2) Although writing has unique contributions to make to learning, it is not an isolated form of expression. It should be integrated with other language activities like reading, listening, and speaking. In my experience, writing in the FL classroom is most effective when this marriage of skills occurs.
- 3) Writing assignments should be designed according to the students' level. Similarly, assignments should be sequenced or presented in several parts and should allow students to rewrite their work responding to facilitative teacher commentary. Sequenced assignments allow teachers to intervene in the composing process. Moreover, with

assignments given in a sequenced progression, students must draw on higher cognitive skills to analyze, synthesize and edit ideas previously mentioned and to integrate new ideas in order to create additional texts.

Creating multiple texts and responding to teacher commentary implies allowing rewrites of student work. As Claire Gaudiani and others have asserted, rewrites are a critical part of the creating process. The first rewrite usually focuses on grammatical features or syntax faulty enough to block the communicative message. Subsequent rewrites demand attention to the important areas of content, style and organization.

Research by Buxton on student revision suggests that novice writers tend to make only those adjustments which place the least pressure on them to reconceive their writing. Buxton postulates that this resistance comes from anxiety rather than from laziness. In the case of foreign language, students often labor for hours to achieve some coherence in content and surface grammar. The process of rewriting can be intimidating because it implies a return to the chaos of fragments where the student began. Buxton's research further suggests that writers can overcome this anxiety through habitual success in rewriting.

The following pre-writing strategies and writing assignments have been designed with these principles in mind and have been thoroughly classroom tested over a number of semesters in a 4 year undergraduate institution.

I) Pre-writing Strategies

A) Sentence-combining Exercises

Before students begin to write it is necessary to provide them with the tools which will call their attention to the common pitfalls of producing short, babyish sentences.

Because of the linguistic immaturity of second language learners, our students are often hesitant to attempt more difficult combinations. They therefore restrict themselves to the safe but uninteresting structures over which they have a degree of control.

Sentence combining is built on the theory which posits that length and complexity of sentences increase as writers mature. This theory has been tested in the FL classroom by Cooper and others and the results published in a text called *Sentence Combining in Second Language Instruction*. These exercises are effective in both upper and lower-level classes. They can be assigned as homework or done in class with small groups or the entire class working together. Every effort should be made to collect authentic examples from student writing.

The following example was taken from a composition written during the first semester of an elementary French course:
Nous avons une petite maison sur un lac. Le lac est très grand et il n'est pas trop des gens.

Below find the new version after the class as a whole was invited to correct the grammar, combine the sentences and embed new information consistent with the author's original

ideas:

Nous avons une petite maison rustique au bord d'un très grand lac où il n'y a pas trop de touristes bruyants.

B) Model for reading texts critically

This model was developed by Dr. Carole Huber of Elizabethtown College. It has worked best in second semester intermediate courses or upper-level conversation/composition courses. It mirrors to a certain extent a hierarchy of thinking skills proposed by Bloom. The model begins with the lower-level process of listing and ends up requiring students to use higher cognitive skills like analysis, synthesis, comparison and ultimately judgment and evaluation. Answers should be written and the first part completed in class with small groups. The second and more difficult section may be reserved as homework.

Model

The model below is used with questions based on an excerpt which appears in the intermediate reader *Comment peut-on être français* by Hules and Baier. The excerpt chosen for discussion is from Raymond Cartier's *Cinquante Amériques*.

Identification

1) Make a list of key terms, phrases, verbs in the Cartier reading.

Addition

2) Write a sentence which summarizes the meaning of each paragraph.

3) Write one sentence that says what these sentences add up

to.

Subtraction

4) What has the author failed to say that you think ought to be said?

Re-relating- drawing an analogy

5) According to the author most French people think the social system in the United States is like...

6. According to Cartier the social system in France is like...

Distinction

7. How are the author's ideas different from what you have thought or read before?

II) Writing Assignments

A) Beginning/intermediate students

1) Hero/Heroine

-Begin by listing names of well-known people from different nations and walks of life on board. Have students take 10 minutes to write a description of one of the people listed. Have students read descriptions aloud without naming the celebrity and allow class to guess the identity.

-Choose especially good description, put on transparency and during the next class meeting have class expand the description.

-Finally have students write a composition in which they describe a personal hero/heroine.

2) Press Conference

-This activity involves both oral interactive communication

and writing and should be completed in class. Choose subject matter for the press conference (visit of Yvette Roudy, advocate of womens' rights, to the U.S.). In class the day before the press conference, divide the class into two groups. The first group (2-3 students or the teacher) includes the visiting dignitaries. The second group involves the rest of the class who assume the role of the press corps. Take about 20 minutes of class time and have the press corps split into pairs to brainstorm and write appropriate questions based on the subject of the conference. Meanwhile the students who will play the role of Mme Roudy and her assistants are given carefully controlled cultural material. They learn the material and try to imagine the kinds of questions they will have to entertain.

-In class on the day of the press conference, the dignitaries solemnly arrive and sit behind a desk or stand behind imaginary microphones. They may prepare visual aids to help answer questions and disseminate important information. The press corps sits in seats facing the important visitors. Working in pairs, one student asks a question while the partner records the answer. Each pair represents a different newspaper and must listen carefully to questions from the other "journalists" so the questioning is not repetitive and the appropriate information is recorded.

-In the pre-writing stage, students compare notes to check for accuracy of information. Finally, each student in the

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press corps must write an article for the newspaper based on the content of the press conference. After news articles are completed, several are chosen and given to the VIPs. In this case, Yvette Roudy and her assistants must write a response to the article indicating if it is an accurate account.

3) Le Journal intime

This is a journal of a twelve month trip in France which includes dialogues and descriptive, narrative passages. The trip is to start at the airport outside Paris and is to include a visit in Paris as well as trips to several other cities and regions of France. This assignment is to be completed over a semester or year. Journals are collected every month.

B) Assignments for intermediate/advanced students

1) Sequenced assignments on cultural topics

Educational system- students will read a selection from "Le Temps des amours" by Pagnol and view the Truffaut film, L'Argent de poche.

Part I

In a short composition describe a typical day from your high school experience. Provide background data (courses, student attitudes toward teachers, extra-curricular activities etc.) which serve to highlight the essential characteristics of the American educational system.

Part II

Students will exchange compositions and complete the following assignment:

After a careful reading of your classmate's paper and a thorough rereading of Pagnol and review of the film, write another composition in which you compare and contrast the portrayal of the French schools with the high school in your classmate's paper. Use specific examples to support your comments.

2) Dialectical journal

On the left page of a journal notebook students are asked to copy a quote, portion of text or even an item from current events. On the right side they are asked to respond to what they have written and to indicate why that text or event was significant to them.

Finally, encouraging students to write more confidently is contingent upon intelligent and supportive teacher commentary. Brannon and Knoblauch stress the need to reexamine the traditional view that teacher commentary is "a product-centered, evaluative activity which resembles literary criticism." They are joined by many other colleagues who note that commentary which provides constructive feedback in the composing process can dramatically improve the quality of student writing.

In practical terms this means beginning with positive comments upon which to base constructive criticism. Involving students in the evaluative process is equally important. One way to achieve this is to frame written comments in the form of questions. Another is to schedule individual or small group conferences so that

teacher/student dialogue is possible. Still another way is to use class time to put good or bad examples of anonymous student texts on transparencies or ditto masters.

These authors caution that positive commentary alone will not guarantee effective follow-through in revision efforts. Students must be asked to produce successive drafts in response to teacher commentary but we must be sure that they understand the comments they receive. In responding to pieces of writing in a second language, it is often an insurmountable task to get beyond the glaring grammatical errors. To facilitate the initial process of categorizing these errors, I recommend a system similar to the one outlined by Theodore Higgs in his article "Coping With Composition" (Hispania 62, No.4, December, 1979).

Similarly, it is not enough to comment on vocabulary and grammar. Even from the beginning of language study students must realize that organization, style, and content count as much as the grammar and vocabulary and should be evaluated as such.

In conclusion, if we agree with Goethe's assertion that in order to know our own tongue we must study other languages, then the most enduring means of achieving that goal is through writing. By having our students write in a second language we will insure that they discover the exciting possibilities of language while they enhance their cognitive development.